

SOME MISDIRECTED LETTERS.

CHAPTER IV—(CONTINUED.)

"I think, M. Bertrand," I said, "that you are Italian."

"No, mon cher monsieur," he answered, with much urbaneness, "I am French. I expect I am rather Italian in my accent and complexion. Several people have made the same mistake. I expect that we natives of the South of France have much that is apparently Italian about us."

"I believe, Monsieur Bertrand, that I have a letter in my pocket belonging to you, but addressed to another person. Your interesting conversation about poisons called it to my recollection. It was addressed to a young woman who answers to the name of Louise, and threatened, I am sure quite playfully, to use poison in case she returned to England."

I watched the face narrowly. He did his best to preserve an impression of perfect impassibility. But those mobile features were incapable of preserving an entire reserve. At last he stammered out, not without shame and hesitation, letting an Italian expression pass him in his agitation:

"I think, signor, for once you are altogether under a mistake."

"Pardon me, there is no mistake. I am the more sure of this as I myself have seen you with a young lady named Louise, which is really the same as Louise, when I was a guest of Lord Bullingford at the Castle, and you were then the 'chef' of his kitchen."

From red to white, from white to red—the red becoming a fiery red, the white a livid, flabby white—the usual transitions of a detected villain's face. Before he had time to utter a renewed denial, which I was sure was coming, I went on:

"I suppose you do not wish me to step forward before the company and denounce you as a liar and a cheat? If not you will sit down quietly and answer my questions in a way so as to avoid observation."

I watched the man fixedly. He coughed as quietly as a lamb.

"I could give you in charge of the police for cheating the insurance company by means of forged documents."

"I never got any money from the insurance company."

I passed over that virtual admission involved in these words, and added:

"By the law of England the attempt to do so is pretty nearly the same as if it had actually done it."

"It is a very stupid law."

"Exactly. We English are a very stupid people. But what I want to know is whether you have added murder to your other accomplishments?"

"I have not committed any murder."

"Perhaps you would like to do so, monsieur. Perhaps that wonderful ring of yours is not so secured that you could not use it in case of an emergency against a friend or an enemy?"

"I wish I could press it against your heart."

There was something so wolfish and murderous in the man's expression that I am convinced that he would have tried the chance of life to life if we had been alone upon the deserted beach outside.

But I looked at the four fine gentlemen at table, who were languidly sipping their wine and lazily conversing, and knew that they would prove a trusty bodyguard, who would save me from the inconvenience of a ferocious encounter.

"There is no use talking, Monsieur Bertrand, or Monsieur Beni, or Signor Mirabolante—whatever you are pleased to call yourself. You will be good enough to answer one or two questions, or I will have to give you in charge."

"And if I satisfy your demands, you will make no further disturbance?"

"That depends on how I am satisfied with your answers."

"And you will not say anything to these gentlemen?"

"I shall certainly tell my friend Mr. Dunne the sort of man whom he has for a neighbor. But I will not do so for the next six weeks, and you will have time to clear out of the country."

The unhappy man made a shrug of despair.

"That will not make any real difference to you, Monsieur Bertrand. I wonder why you want to keep up the imposition of being a country gentleman."

"Because, sir, I am a gentleman, and I like to be with gentlemen, and the English are the best gentlemen anywhere. I am an artist—as much of an artist as the President in your Royal Academy. I have composed dinners for Lord Lister there, though he has not known it; and they have not been as good dinners as I have given you under my humble roof to-night. And when I make my money like an artist, I like to spend it like a lord. I like to have a stake and a seat in the country, where I can retire in the interval of professional work."

I listened with intent interest to the avowed made by this singular being. I could not help saying:

"And I suppose that all this fine talk is what you have picked up in the houses of the people where you have been?"

"Yes; and few of the painters of pictures and writers of books know as much about them as I know."

"But, Monsieur le Chef, the time is short. I have some questions to put, and some of them are looking this way. Is your Lady Louise alive?"

"You will not give any information to the insurance office?"

"I will not. You have not received any money from them, and it is no part of my business to take any further steps."

"She is alive?"

"Is the really your wife?"

A horrid scowl passed over his face.

"As I tell you everything, I may as well tell you this. She is really my wife."

"And madame?"

"Madame is clever, madame has money; but she is older than me, and she is ugly. She is not my wife."

"Now where is Louise at the present time? You write it down immediately."

I took out my pocket-book and presented it to him, with a pencil. After a moment's hesitation he wrote down an

address. I recognized it as the name of a small Swiss village in an obscure valley on the north side of the Alps.

"But, monsieur, you will leave me to my repose? When I have completed my circle of professional engagements, I love peace, the happiness of the country; the fresh air, the open spaces, the nice people of the country. I have made you every possible reparation, and I only ask you to leave me alone. Believe me that it will be best for you."

I took no notice of his appeal, but went on:

"Would you mind telling me, monsieur, as a matter of literary information, whether these means and methods of poisoning have really any existence in the present day?"

He smiled grimly, and said grimly: "I could have poisoned you all when you were dining here, and not a single carcass of the lot would have showed one trace. I rather wish I had."

And here this singular conversation terminated. I made a pretense that I was unwell, and returned on foot to my friend's house, which was less than two miles off. My excuses were more readily received because my thorough inability to enjoy the feast had been noted. All the way back I was busily engaged in thinking how I could best turn to account the extraordinary revelations I had received.

Mr. Dunne returned much earlier than I had expected. "It is curious that you had not gone very long before M. Bertrand was taken ill. Before you left we were obliged to support him upstairs."

The next day I returned to town. A few days later I received the astonishing information that M. Bertrand was dead.

He never again came down from the room to which they had borne him.

The so-called Madame Bertrand disappeared very shortly afterwards. It was discovered that the Bertrands were very much in debt, and no attempt was ever made to settle matters.

Nothing ever came out that he died from other than natural causes, after a few days' illness. But remembering how complete was my detection of the man, how depraved and desperate his character, how bitter the disappointment to his ruling passion of display, a dark suspicion has at times crossed my mind that, by some of those modes of poisoning which he seemed to know so well, he had put an end to his own existence. Of course it is a great shock to think that you may indirectly have been the cause of a fellow creature putting an end to his existence, but I do not see how I could have acted differently. Indeed, I acted for the best; and if things were to come over again, I should do the same thing a second time.

I have only a very few words of epilogue to add to this narration. When, not long afterwards, I took my wedding tour, I made a point of seeking the Swiss village, where Louise was to be found. I remember the place so well. It lies far from any direct road. Travelers who wished to shorten their journey found a bridge-road, which connected pass with pass. It was the usual scene. The densely built little village, the narrow, darkened pathway, the church with the open door, the deep cool fountain springing up by the wayside, the forests of chestnut and oak climbing up the mountain slopes; and far away, above the solemn pines, the glacier and the snow-clad mountain peaks. In this little village I found Louise living with her husband's mother in the deepest poverty. He had given her nothing. She lived by what she could earn; and she could earn little for herself and babe. Her villain of a husband had managed by many threats to get her banished to this forlorn spot. Her greatest grief seemed removed when I repeated to her his statement that she was really his wife. The truth of this statement I had no means of verifying, and did not care to verify it; enough that it was satisfactory to her own mind. My wife and I had the great happiness of taking her home with us, and restoring her to her mother.

She is Mrs. Wilson now. The boy is a fine little fellow; but he is not alone in the nursery. Whenever I go to visit at the Castle I shall always go also to visit at the cottage.

THE END.

When "Thad" Stevens was a young lawyer in the Pennsylvania Courts, he once lost his case by what he considered a wrong ruling of the Judge. Disgusted, he banged his law books on the table, picked up his hat, and started for the door with some vigorous words in his mouth. The Judge feeling that his dignity was assailed, rose impressively and said: "Mr. Stevens!" Mr. Stevens stopped, turned and bowed deferentially. "Mr. Stevens," said the Judge, "do you intend by such conduct to express your contempt for this court?" And Stevens, with mock seriousness, answered: "Express my contempt for this court! No, sir! I was trying to conceal it, Your Honor!"

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